

# Intersectionality in Austere Times: Boundary Crossing Conversations<sup>1</sup>

## Cluster Editors

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**Deborah Stienstra** is a Professor of Disability Studies at University of Manitoba and author of *About Canada: Disability Rights* (Fernwood 2012). Her research and publications explore the intersections of disabilities, gender, childhood, and Indigeness, identifying barriers to, as well as possibilities for, engagement and transformative change.

Finlay and Stienstra are co-investigators on the project *Changing Public Services: Women and Intersectional Analysis* with the Canadian Research Institute for the Advancement of Women.

The papers in this cluster were originally part of a workshop at the Canadian Political Science Association (CPSA) annual conference at Brock University in 2014. Its starting point was the 2013 edition of *Signs* dedicated to the theme of intersectionality in which Sumi Cho, Kimberlé Williams Crenshaw, and Leslie McCall state that intersectionality has provided “a gathering place for open-ended investigations of the overlapping and conflicting dynamics of race, gender, class, sexuality, nation, and other inequalities” (788). The workshop, co-organized between the Race, Ethnicity, Indigenous Peoples, and Politics section and the Women and Politics section of the CPSA, sought to host such a gathering place of conversations and collaboration. In the same way, this special cluster of *Atlantis* offers a venue to explore theoretical, methodological, public policy, and strategic questions related to intersectionality as a tool of social analysis.

The workshop, and this cluster are also located within the current moment of austerity in Canada and globally when interrogating the systems of power that produce and reinforce multiple axes of oppression is particularly pressing. Austerity is not handed out evenly – social and economic policy making in austere times has had a greater impact on women, racialized groups, Indigenous populations, people with disabilities, and queer communities. Globally, cuts to social spending on health care, education, and social welfare and increased privatization, commodification, militarization, and securitization are having devastating effects on marginalized peoples. In this context, intersectionality is at once more challenging and more necessary. As can be seen in articles by Dan Irving and Deborah Stienstra in this thematic cluster, austerity intensifies the misdirected hostility and scapegoating already experienced by stigmatized and dispossessed communities.

While the papers in this cluster draw from a variety of influences including: feminism, critical race theory, political economy, post-structuralism,

institutionalism, queer theory, and critical disability studies, they have a common interest in understanding and challenging complex relations of power and oppression. They are also drawn together by some shared themes. The articles show how the restructuring of the state (including cuts to social programs and services) and the economy (growth of service sector and precarious employment) has brought increased economic insecurity and weakened social citizenship for marginalized groups. Social and structural factors are sidelined through individualizing discourses and policies.

These articles also reflect the importance of scale, place, and complexity. Political economists and critical geographers use the concept of scale to describe “the focal setting at which spatial boundaries are defined for a specific social claim, activity or behaviour” (Agnew qtd in Mahon and Keil 2009, 8). Rianne Mahon and Roger Keil (2009) add that “each scale needs to be understood in terms of its relation to other scales ... Rather than assuming set dimensions of social reality and the structuring of the human condition, scales are socially produced and reproduced through myriad, sometimes purposeful, sometimes erratic, social, economic, political, and cultural actions” (8). Scale is also central to intersectional analysis. As Olena Hankivsky (2014) explains,

Intersectionality is concerned with understanding the effects between and across various levels in society, including macro (global and national-level institutions and policies), meso or intermediate (provincial and regional-level institutions and policies), and micro levels (community-level, grassroots institutions and policies as well as the individual or ‘self’). Attending to this *multi-level* dimension of intersectionality also requires addressing processes of inequity and differentiation across levels of structure, identity and representation.” (9)

The authors in this thematic cluster cover the individual, interpersonal, familial, local, subnational, regional, national, and international, demonstrating how austerity is played out on the terrain of the body to the global system. Isabel Altamirano-Jiménez describes austerity as a “contradictory and messy process that materializes differently across diverse geo-political spaces yet, has important commonalities that account for patterns.”

Finally, each of the articles speaks to intersectionality as a guide for political action. They

consider intersectional policy analysis, divisions and solidarities, and the building of resistance strategies. Citing Rosemarie Garland-Thomson (2011), Stienstra suggests that “the experience of misfitting can produce subjugated knowledges from which an oppositional and politicized identity might arise” (597).

In Deborah Stienstra’s article, “DisAbling Women and Girls in Austere Times,” the intersection of gender and disability provides the foundation for applying concepts of fitting/misfitting, debility, and capacity to her analysis of austerity. She argues that neoliberalism, and the resulting decline of public supports, rely on an ideology of self-sacrifice, self-investment, and independence. People with disabilities, particularly women, are blamed for their under/unemployment and precarious work. She goes further by relating Wendy Brown’s (2016) notion of “sacrificial citizenship” to recent debates in Canada about physician-assisted death. Stienstra problematizes a discourse of individualism, choice, and personal responsibility as it exists in the absence of adequate public health and social services for people with disabilities. In tracing the embodied implications of austerity, there is an interesting dialogue between Stienstra and Dan Irving.

Dan Irving’s piece, “Gender Transition and Job In/Security: Trans\* Un/der/employment Experiences and Labour Anxieties in Post-Fordist Society,” examines the tension between the expectations of the growing service industry (or immaterial labour) and non-normative gender performance. He shows that the post-Fordist service economy, heavily reliant on emotional labour, marks gender-conforming bodies as desirable and relegates trans\* people to conditions of under/unemployment and precarious work. The politics of individualization, which make workers responsible for their own employability and risk management, leads to invisibility and erasure of trans\* workers and even to violence. Using narratives from interviews, Irving conveys both the socioeconomic and the psychological impacts of the austere labour market in which gender variation is positioned as a threat to customer service and relationships with co-workers.

Christina Gabriel also highlights the current individualization and human capital fixation in “Framing Families: Neo-Liberalism and the Family Class within Canadian Immigration Policy.” She assesses the extent to which the required gender-

based analysis (GBA) of the Immigration and Refugee Protection Act is able to challenge the neoliberal and criminalizing orientation of recent changes to the family category. Critics have argued that efforts by the previous Conservative government to tackle “marriage fraud” through the Conditional Permanent Residence (CPR) measure would increase the vulnerability of sponsored spouses. Gabriel maintains that, although gender mainstreaming brought some responsive changes to the legislation in this regard, it ultimately suffers from a lack of intersectional policy analysis. An intersectional lens would pose deeper questions about which communities are likely targets for state suspicion and how immigration policy is framed in a limited, market-driven way.

Similarly, Bailey Gerrits draws attention to processes of individualization, *responsibilization*, securitization, and criminalization in “An Analysis of Two Albertan Anti-Domestic Violence Public Service Campaigns: Governance in Austere Times.” Employing an anti-oppression feminist critical discourse analysis, Gerrits studies public service advertisements as a form of discursive politics. In addition to drawing attention to their racialized, gendered, and heteronormative imagery, Gerrits situates these ads within the austerity backdrop of declining social provisioning and supports. They reflect, she contends, the minimal government and maximum individual responsibility doctrines characteristic of neoliberal disciplinary governance techniques.

Governance as a mode of management and disciplinary power is also taken up in Isabel Altamirano-Jiménez’s essay “How do Real Indigenous Forest Dwellers Live? Neoliberal Conservation in Oaxaca, Mexico.” Altamirano-Jiménez outlines the ways in which conservation schemes in the Zapotec community of Santiago Lachiguirí advance marketization, capital accumulation, and (neo)colonialism. She “reveals neo-liberal conservation as a racialized and gendered process that downloads the burden of protecting the environment onto the most vulnerable social groups” and that serves to dislocate and dispossess Indigenous peoples. Altamirano-Jiménez embraces a form of intersectional analysis that highlights not only identities, but also intersecting relations of power, domination, and oppression.

Our cluster concludes with “Intersectionality

and the United Nations World Conference Against Racism” by Abigail Bakan and Yasmeen Abu-Laban. Bakan and Abu-Laban view the 2001 World Conference Against Racism (WCAR) held in Durban, South Africa as a significant site of feminist intersectional discussion within the United Nations. Even though, as the authors argue, it certainly was not immune to the “limitations of liberal anti-discrimination politics” and its contribution has been overshadowed by geopolitical events, namely the withdrawal of the US and Israel from the proceedings, Bakan and Abu-Laban revisit the WCAR. They view the conference as a pivotal intervention into gender and race, feminism and anti-racism. For instance, they foreground the “politics of emotion” (as also seen in Irving’s paper), noting that WCAR allowed for deliberation on the trauma of racism, colonialism, and oppression. They urge a reconceptualization of what they call the “Durban moment” as a case of intersectionality “going global.”

These articles raise difficult, timely, and critical questions for all of us. What constitutes an intersectional analysis? What are the challenges of doing intersectional work? How would public policy be different if it was informed by intersectionality? What does intersectional political practice look like? How can intersectionality build solidarity? In these austere times, there is no better time to create spaces for intersectional scholarship and strategy.

## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> We would like to thank Davina Bhandar for co-organizing the 2014 workshop.

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